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The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

17 Gator, Reptile Warrior

Battle for Power in the Shadowy Swamps

UK £1.75 IR £1.75

From a story by Frank Graves

Australia $4.50 NZ $5.50 Singapore $4.95 Malaysia MYR6.95 Malta £M1.50

Julek Heller

On the Seventeenth Day . . .

In the swamp a hidden danger
Beckons the unwary stranger.
Find the prize in Gator's mound.
Find the friend from good unbound.
Find the craft that saves the day,
Find the swiftly flowing way
That leads you to the land of dreams
Where all is never what it seems.

As the avalanche of rocks and stones died away, Richard looked despairingly into the ravine. He scanned the stew of displaced earth and gravel but saw no sign of life. Zard was dead. Then as Richard turned to Melek and Orkan, he heard a gritty sound.

Off to their left, Zard was clambering over the cliff edge with a battleaxe in his hand. He told them how he had been forced to roll away a large rock to get at his weapon. In falling, the rock had dislodged another rock and then another. He had just managed to grab the axe and scramble to one side before the landslide took hold.

"What a relief!" Richard said. "I think we'd better get away from this place as soon as possible." First, however, he asked Melek to read out the next prophecy.

"We must find Gator's mound," Richard said, when the scribe had finished.

The four made for the plateau's far edge, walking in loose formation over the boulder-cluttered ground, eyes and ears alert for enemy action.

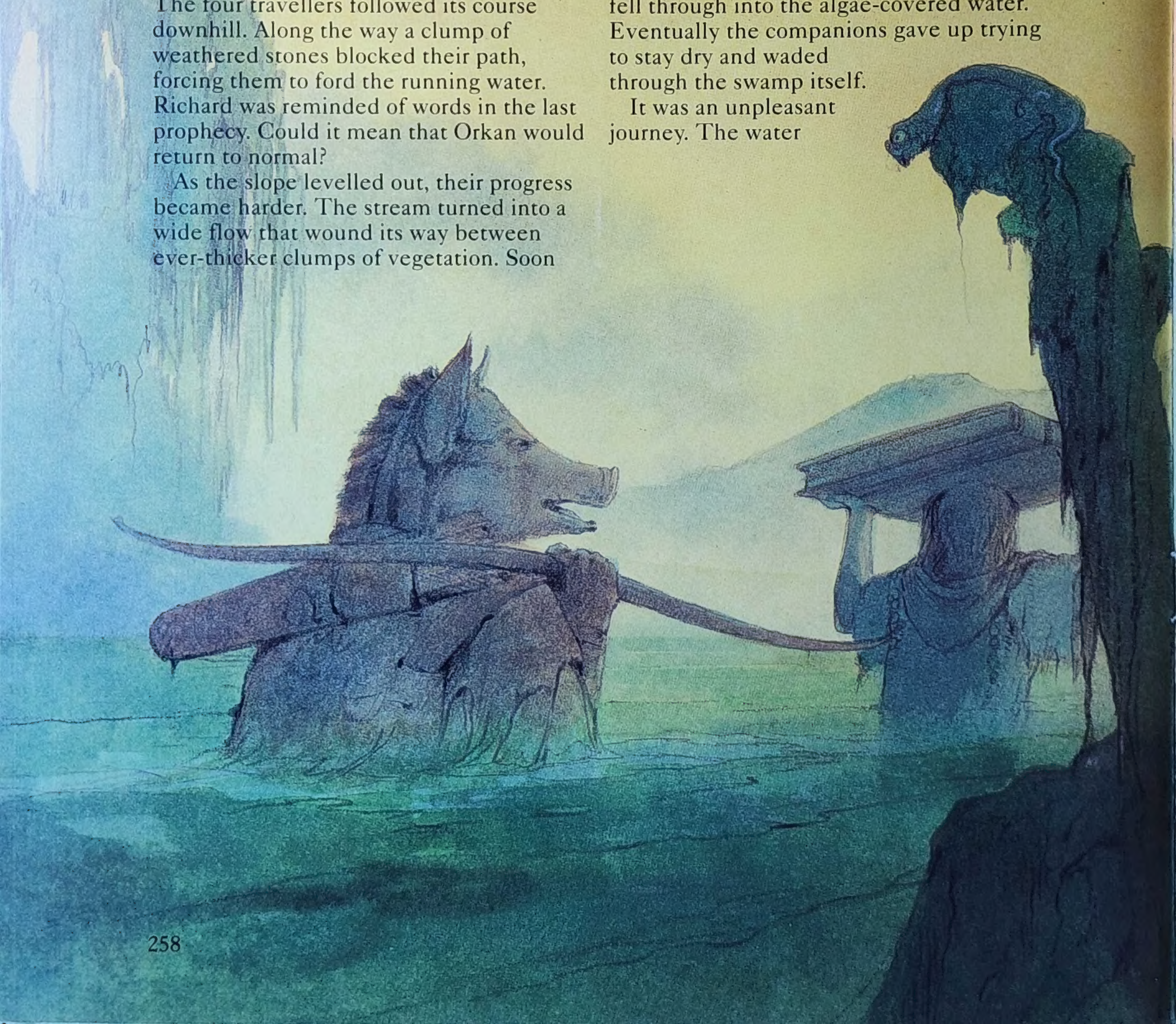
Into the swamps

Before long the ground sloped into a gentle incline split by a spring-fed stream. The four travellers followed its course downhill. Along the way a clump of weathered stones blocked their path, forcing them to ford the running water. Richard was reminded of words in the last prophecy. Could it mean that Orkan would return to normal?

As the slope levelled out, their progress became harder. The stream turned into a wide flow that wound its way between ever-thicker clumps of vegetation. Soon the clumps turned into islands and the once-fresh water curdled into a stagnant mass. They were in a seemingly endless swamp. Richard would have tried to find a way round it, had not the Path Finder pointed insistently at a large hillock that rose from the morass.

The travellers tried to keep on dry ground, using the islands as a path, but they were unreliable. It was impossible to tell whether they were solid earth or jumbles of floating debris that had grown a deceptive green mat. More than once, Richard was fooled by the camouflage and fell through into the algae-covered water. Eventually the companions gave up trying to stay dry and waded through the swamp itself.

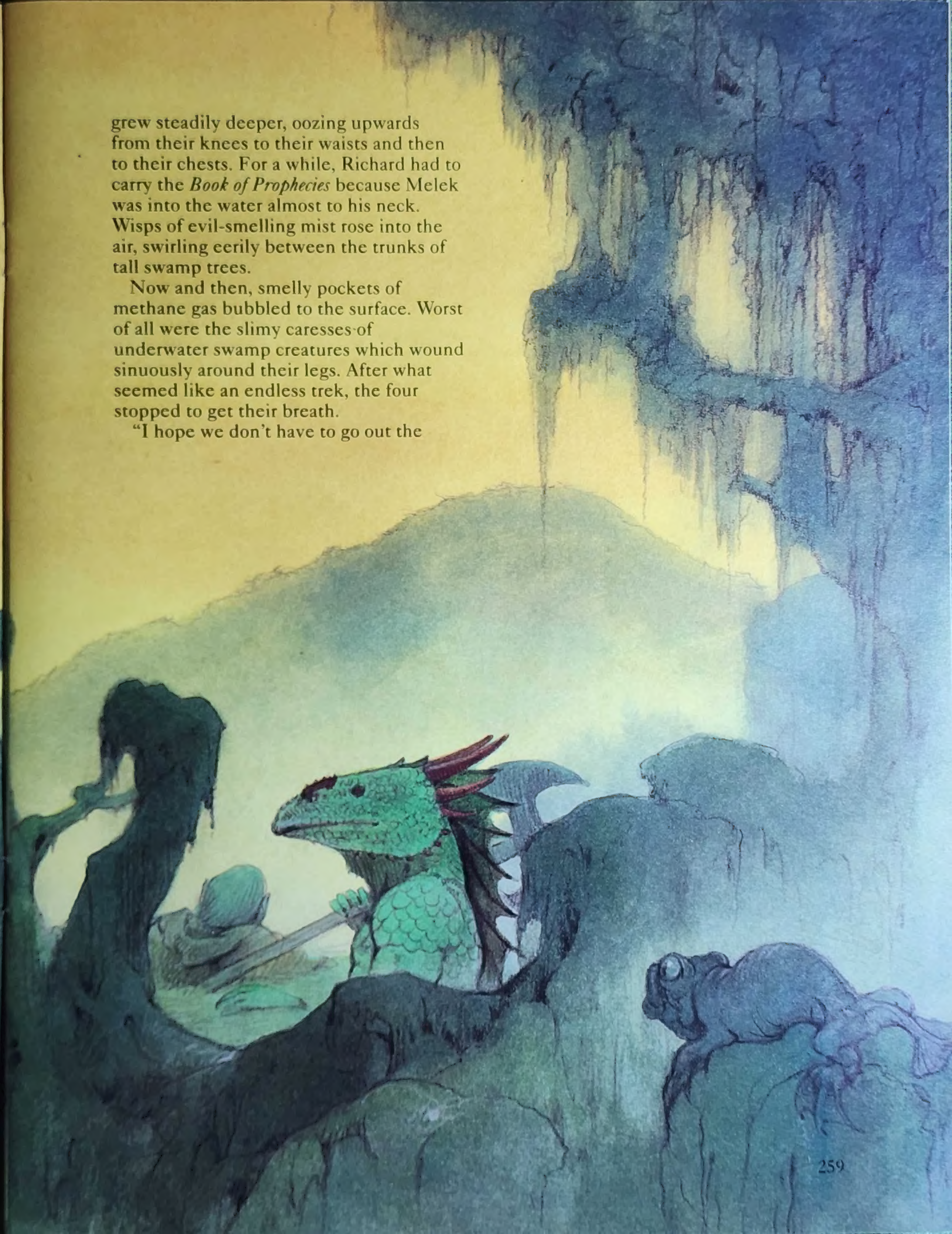
It was an unpleasant journey. The water



grew steadily deeper, oozing upwards from their knees to their waists and then to their chests. For a while, Richard had to carry the *Book of Prophecies* because Melek was into the water almost to his neck. Wisps of evil-smelling mist rose into the air, swirling eerily between the trunks of tall swamp trees.

Now and then, smelly pockets of methane gas bubbled to the surface. Worst of all were the slimy caresses of underwater swamp creatures which wound sinuously around their legs. After what seemed like an endless trek, the four stopped to get their breath.

"I hope we don't have to go out the



same way we came in," Melek said.

Richard felt a tingling sensation on his forearm. He looked down and saw a fat slug-like creature clinging there. A smear of blood oozed from the point where it met his flesh. More of the things had attached themselves to his arm. He was about to bite one off when Zard stopped him.

Greedy bloodsuckers

"Don't touch it! It's a leech. If you pull it off, its teeth will stay embedded in your arm. This place is crawling with germs and bacteria. If the leeches don't suck you dry, gangrene will set in before another day is out. The only way is to burn them off."

Even as Zard spoke, he checked his own body as well as Orkan's and Melek's. They were all covered in the slimy creatures.

"How are we going to burn them off here?" Richard asked looking at the sodden ground. "Everything's so damp."

Zard shook his head, then searched about for a lump of rock. He gathered together the driest twigs he could find, then unstrapped his battleaxe and struck the rock to make a spark.

With some difficulty, he got a small blaze going. He plucked a few reeds and thrust them into the spluttering flames. When they began to smoulder, he blew on them until their tips glowed red.

"Give me your arm," he said to Richard.

Loosening the leeches

Richard held out his arm. The leech was still gorging greedily as Zard touched the reed's hot tip against it. The swollen creature sizzled and dropped away, leaving a set of tiny punctures to show where its fangs had gripped. Zard burnt off another seven leeches from his upper arm, then ordered him to strip off.

Richard did so and was aghast to see leeches hanging in clusters all over his body. One by one, they succumbed to Zard's hot reeds. When Richard was given the all-clear, Zard gave Orkan and Melek the same treatment. Then Richard went to work on the Guardian.

"Now," Zard said, picking a white, clover-shaped leaf from the ground. "Find

as many of these as you can and rub them over your wounds. The juice will take away the pain and stop them going septic."

Zard helped them look, his practised eye picking out the tiny plants with ease. They had all smeared themselves with the juice and were preparing to climb the hillock, when a command rang out from somewhere ahead.

"All of you, drop your weapons!" a disembodied voice called out. Orkan did not hesitate and threw down his sword at once. Zard and Richard stood motionless. The voice called out again, "You there! Leave the axe!"

The Guardian still did not move. Instead he boomed out with an air of unquestionable authority, "Come out, whoever you are. Show yourself."

There was a silence, then from behind a

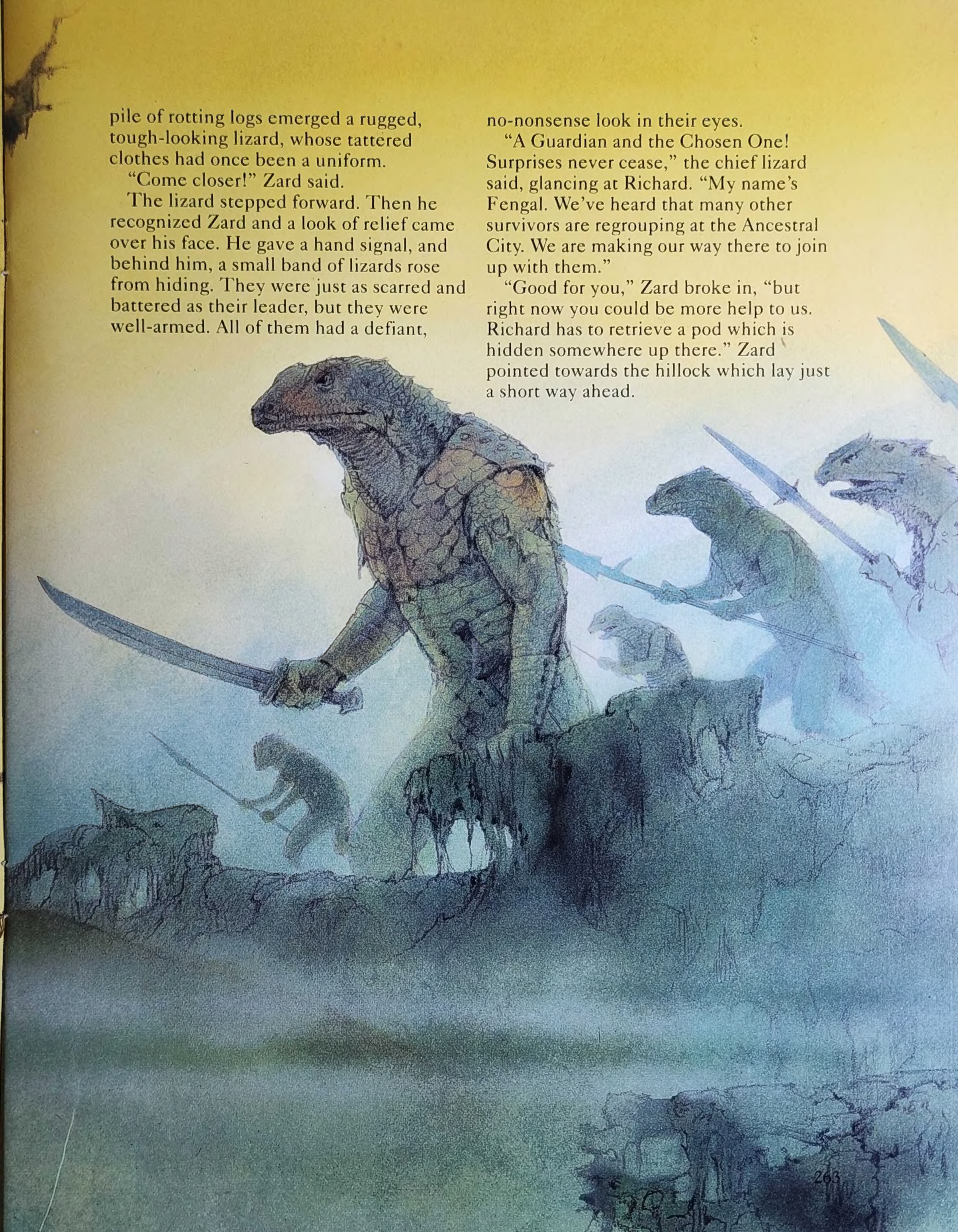
pile of rotting logs emerged a rugged, tough-looking lizard, whose tattered clothes had once been a uniform.

"Come closer!" Zard said.

The lizard stepped forward. Then he recognized Zard and a look of relief came over his face. He gave a hand signal, and behind him, a small band of lizards rose from hiding. They were just as scarred and battered as their leader, but they were well-armed. All of them had a defiant, no-nonsense look in their eyes.

"A Guardian and the Chosen One! Surprises never cease," the chief lizard said, glancing at Richard. "My name's Fengal. We've heard that many other survivors are regrouping at the Ancestral City. We are making our way there to join up with them."

"Good for you," Zard broke in, "but right now you could be more help to us. Richard has to retrieve a pod which is hidden somewhere up there." Zard pointed towards the hillock which lay just a short way ahead.



Fengal shrugged. "If you're going in there, you'll really need help. We've battled with a few of the Evil One's forces in the swamp already. Their leader is in there. What do you want us to do?"

Richard explained their task. Then the lizard forces and the four set off through the mist, weapons at the ready. Now and then, they heard strange slithering noises in the undergrowth.

A FEARSOME ENEMY

The mist cleared to reveal the first sight of the companions' enemy. Before them stood a mob of alligators – large, leathery, well-armed and well-armoured. They jostled impatiently, eager for battle.

Behind them, an enormous alligator sat on a rough nest of branches and, as Richard looked at the deep-set yellow eyes, the long snout, the killer teeth, he felt a gush of terror run through his body.

"Welcome to my kingdom!" The creature spoke with a cavernous chuckle. "I am Gator. Whisper my name as you die." He looked at his troops and bellowed, "Get them!"

Soon the lizard forces were fighting for their lives. The

alligators mashed into them, breaking heads and scything limbs. As the lizards fell one by one, Richard decided to act on his own account. He ducked to the rear and worked his way round the field of combat.

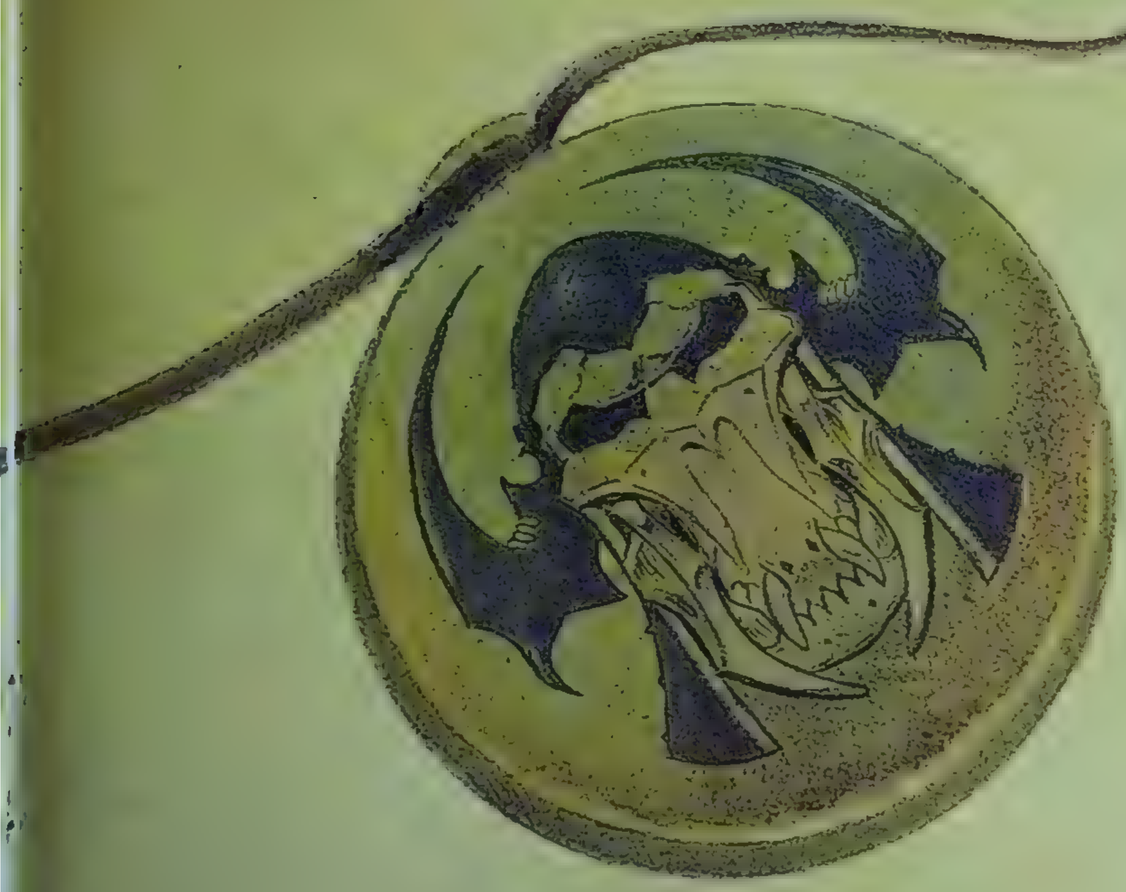
Evil in mind

Gator's piercing eyes were occupied with the fight. Only Orkan noticed Richard depart. He knew that Fengal could never win. He knew that the Evil One was the only master, and he knew that he must kill Richard. He, too, left the battle and followed his old friend.

Richard circled round behind Gator. His one thought was to take the alligator by surprise and sink his dagger into his neck. He was readying his aim when Orkan grabbed his arm.

Richard lurched back. His dagger ripped through the air, catching on a slender thong, and an amulet fell from around Orkan's neck. It was a circular stone carved with a horned emblem. Deep in its heart, a wild light pulsed with primitive excitement. The glowing jewel flickered through the air and landed in the swamp. There was a brief flurry of steam and then it was gone.

Richard turned to see Orkan swaying from side to side and rubbing his eyes in bewilderment. All trace of guile had gone.



"What happened?" Orkan cried.

"I don't know," Richard mumbled hesitantly, "but I think everything is going to be all right now."

"I feel very dizzy," Orkan seemed a bit shaken.

"It was that amulet," Richard said grimly. "It must have been a trap set by the Evil One. It changed you completely." Orkan hung his head dejectedly.

Renewed allegiance

"Come on, let's get the pod," Richard said, grabbing his friend by the shoulder. They looked round at Gator.

Their enemy was standing up, directing his troops. Richard suddenly spotted the purple Pod in the alligator's nest and reached in to snatch it from the bed of rotting twigs. Then he and Orkan stumbled back towards their own forces.

Fengal's lizards were down to only a few hardy survivors, but they had cut a swathe

through the alligator forces. Zard mustered his strength and, with a fearsome war-cry, charged into the mob, swinging his battleaxe. The alligators fled, and pelted past their leader, running in sheer cowardice.

Gator lunged with raking, iron claws and swung his tail in a vicious swipe. Zard ducked and the tail hit one of Fengal's lizards, smashing his head into a spray of grey brain-matter. It whipped back for another attack.

Zard was already upon him. He raised his axe and swung it with all his might at the powerful chest. It sank deep. Gator blinked once in

amazement, then he slumped to the ground. The fighting was done.

With Gator's death, the Evil One's hold on his troops was gone. The alligators emerged from the undergrowth, unarmed and with a dazed expression on their faces. They were no longer a threat. Indeed, now that they were free of evil, Zard would lead them with the surviving lizards back to the Ancestral City.

Towards the Sea

"You must go on and finish your quest," Zard told Richard. "It's time for us to part company. We'll meet again."

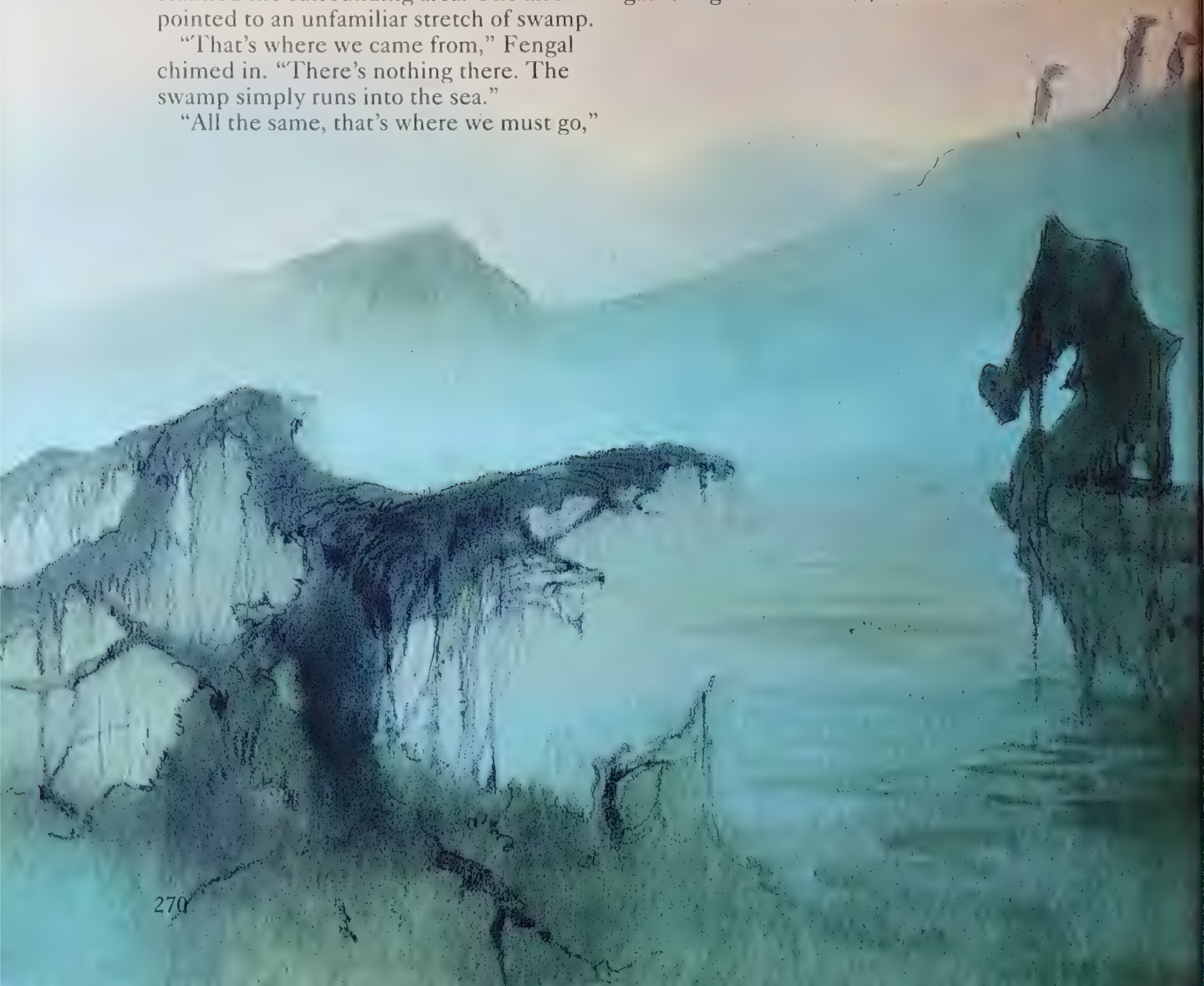
Richard took out the Path Finder and scanned the surrounding area. The arrow pointed to an unfamiliar stretch of swamp.

"That's where we came from," Fengal chimed in. "There's nothing there. The swamp simply runs into the sea."

"All the same, that's where we must go," Richard replied. Somehow, Orkan's return to normal had boosted his confidence and he felt little apprehension about what lay ahead.

"Well, good luck to you," Zard said. Then he nodded at Orkan. "I see your friend's back to normal. Your guess about the prophecy was right. Let's hope it works for the amulet, too."

They said their farewells and then the two bands parted. Zard led Fengal and his lizards, with the reformed alligators, down one side of the hillock. Richard, Orkan and Melek strode down the other. As they descended, they saw distant specks circling in the sky. The vultures were gathering. Within hours, the battlefield



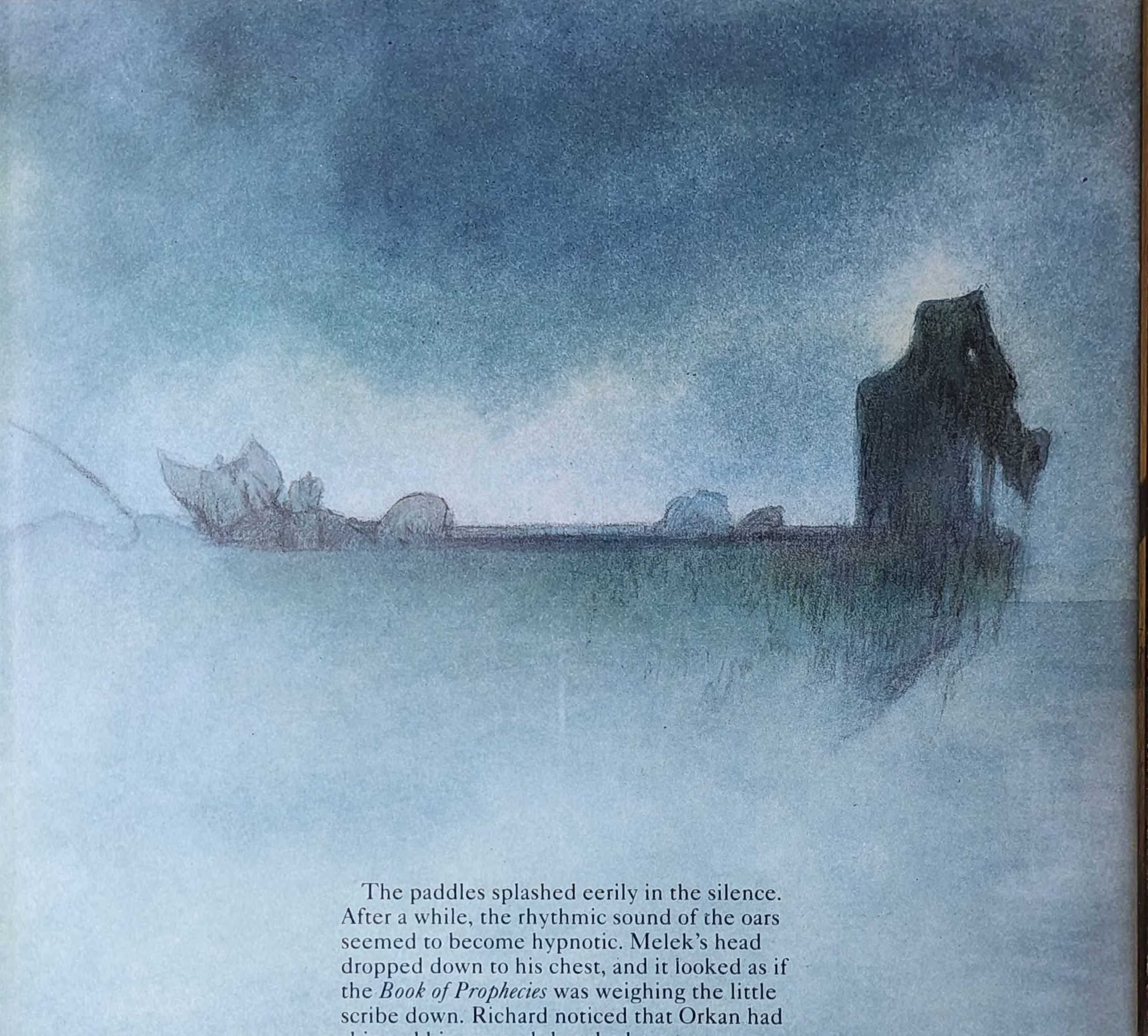
would be picked clean.

To Richard's delight, the marsh was clearer beyond the hillock. Instead of dank slime, it now flowed with a channel of fresh water.

"What's that?" Orkan pointed to a slender shape lying beneath a tree. Cautiously, they approached the tree.

Their luck was in. It was an old boat, fashioned out of a hollowed-out log. Although it was covered in slime and moss, there was just enough room for the three of them. They inspected the boat carefully. The hull seemed strong enough.

"This should be okay," Orkan said after a quick inspection. The three piled in, and with the help of some roughly-made paddles steered their way down the channel. On either side soared vast trees, hung about with garlands of moss. As the channel grew wider, the trees thinned out, their cage-like roots spreading wider into weird, contorted formations.



The paddles splashed eerily in the silence. After a while, the rhythmic sound of the oars seemed to become hypnotic. Melek's head dropped down to his chest, and it looked as if the *Book of Prophecies* was weighing the little scribe down. Richard noticed that Orkan had shipped his oar, and that the boat was beginning to turn in a circle.

Battle against sleep

Richard fought desperately to keep his eyes open. Melek's and Orkan's lids had already fallen over their eyes.

The three companions were helpless against the fatigue that was coming over them. Soon they were dreaming of a boat that took them far out to sea.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They are still following our heroes and can be seen somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 16, Shoomi and Shoobi were on page 243.

Life Force Pod

3-Minute Challenge

There is a pod hidden somewhere in Gator's Shadow Swamps. Can you spot it on one of the pages in less than three minutes?

Watch out for a clue in the next issue that will tell you which of the Life Force Pods Richard retrieves in the Shadow Swamps.

In issue 16, Zard's Battleaxe was hidden on the rock under Melek on page 242.

Monsters and Magic

When you have finished reading about Gator, look at Morbane's story cards and find out about Duku and Sebek. Which of these characters do you think Gator is based on?

In issue 16, Cragmar was based on the Golem.

Puzzle Map

Cut out the two puzzle pieces and fit them on to your Ancestral World map poster.

Power of Evil

Find the source of the Evil One's Power, and win a top of the range Atari computer!
Cut out the letter blocks and keep them safe. When you have 26 letters, you will get a clue to help you form them into a phrase that will reveal the secret of the Evil One's power.

Competition details will be given in issue 26.

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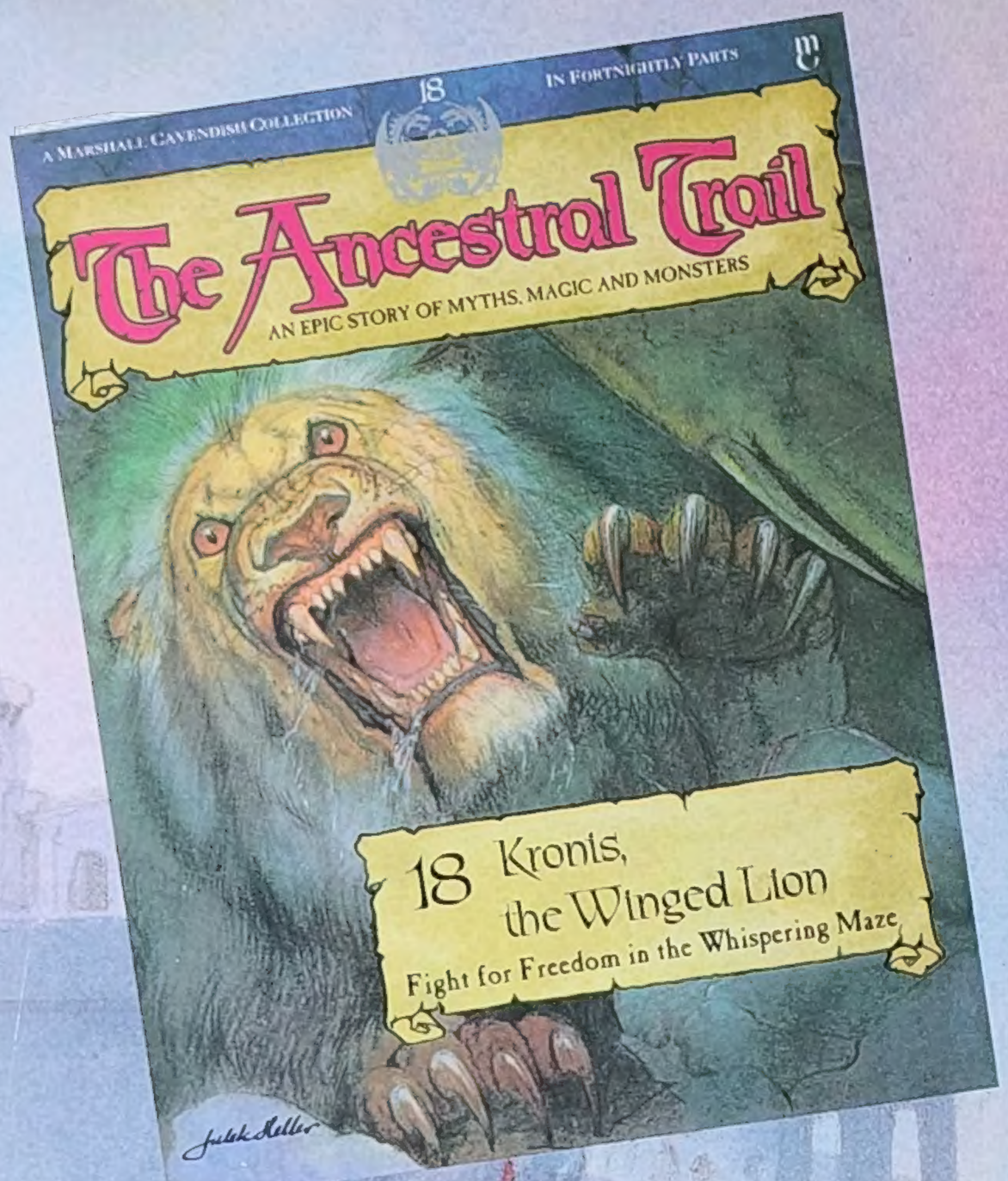
Colour by Bright Arts Ltd. Typeset Output by Litho Link Ltd. Printed in Great Britain.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Fight for Freedom in the Whispering Maze

In Issue 18

Kronis, the Winged Lion

Trapped in a maze of streets on Stone Fish Island, the heroes find a Guardian tethered by Kronis' magic. How will the trio evade the evil winged lion and release the Guardian?

plus

- Two creepy stories from Morbane about flesh-eating creatures.
- For **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game – a location recorder and six Life Force Pods.

Coming in Issue 19

Nemis, Master of the Deep

Dragged down into the depths of the Sea of Lost Souls, the trio are held captive in a sunken city. Can they survive their underwater prison?

plus

Morbane tells of water maidens who lure mariners with their sweet songs • More pieces for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

ISBN 0-7485-4201-9
9 780748 542017